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Pottery was not confined to household chattels; great roof ornaments of baked clay were made to adorn the temples. Sun-dried adobes were commonly used for general house construction. However, they were sometimes fired into bricks which formed the back walls of fireplaces or were substituted for dressed stone in the corners of buildings. A temple at Tizatlan carries brick construction in the pillars before the altar, but rubble faced with cut stone was preferred as a general building material for temples. Before the great temples, braziers the height of a man, combined ritualistic usefulness with architectural ornament. Cones of baked clay were used as studding to keep the plaster from slipping off the temple walls and to serve as a decorative element as well.[11]

The Mexican crasftsman had at hand an abundance of good pottery clay, which from the earliest times provided a medium for plastic experiment and experience. Work in clay created the background for that sureness and security in creation that stands out in the later Mexican sculpture in stone and wood. According to our Western standards, clay is a substance inferior to wood or stone for plastic expression. However, the ancient Mexicans, like the old Chinese, considered it fit for the finest examples of their arts and crafts.

Mexican craftsmanship, whatever the tribe and whatever the era, was superb in that it answered the necessities and ideals of both the time and the people. There is little evidence of a wide gap between superior and inferior workmanship, as in our Western civilization, where there is less need or opportunity for high-grade handwork. In unindividualized societies the general skills of the tribesmen, so far as can be judged by their work, follow a more even course than in

1:Vaillant A-5 (1928-1936)1941 NU7 Aztec NU7

182 elaborated and specialized groups. To turn such craftsmanship into art required a mere flick of the switch of social demand. The arts, as considered in the next chapters, were just projections of the craft background.

181 The measure of Aztec civilization cannot be gauged solely by its technical achievements. The arts and crafts transcend the products of Old World peoples at the same mechanical level. The spirit of the Aztec people, as exemplified in their religious art, soared to the lofty heights attained by the creators of all those ancient civilizations, like Egypt and Mesopotamia, whose monuments reflect the glory of their builders' religious devotion.

1:Vaillant A-5 (1928-1936)1941 NU7 Aztec NU7

CHAPTER XII

FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND WAR

The relationships of Aztec tribes to each other in peace and war, the nature of the Aztec domain and methods of military organization and warfare

THE COMMUNITY or tribe was the center of the political and economic life of the Aztecs. Existence depended on the favor of the gods, who participated directly in the tribal fortunes, so that the degree of elaboration of the ceremonial structures was an accurate gauge of tribal prosperity. A man's position in the civil life of the community had a corresponding level in the hierarchy, since conspicuous fulfillment of civil obligations entailed an equal attainment in piety and observance of ritual. The basic design for living was a communal agriculture. The early tribal existence sought to achieve this pattern by avoiding other peoples and finding new land to settle. There is an essential affinity between agriculture and political isolation, just as commerce and manufacture require successively broader political contacts.[1]

In the early history of the Valley of Mexico there appear to have been a series of small isolated settlements which carried on a vague process of exchange. The Toltec civilization seems to have attained uniform development over a wide area spread by a population which gradually filled up unoccupied territory. There was little to suggest war or con-